

STATEMENT OF DANIEL N. WENK, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES, CONCERNING S. 868, TO AMEND THE WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS ACT TO DESIGNATE A SEGMENT OF THE TAUNTON RIVER IN THE STATE OF MASSACHUSETTS AS COMPONENT OF THE NATIONAL WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS SYSTEM, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

SEPTEMBER 11, 2007

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before your committee today to discuss the views of the Department of the Interior on S. 868, a bill to amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act by designating a segment of the Taunton River as a component of the national wild and scenic rivers system.

The Department is currently completing the study authorized by Public Law 106-318 to determine the eligibility and suitability of the Taunton River for inclusion in the national wild and scenic rivers system. The draft report and environmental assessment is currently out for public and agency comment, with the comment period scheduled to close on September 17, 2007. We request that the committee defer action on the bill until the study is complete. In addition, if this bill moves forward, we would like to work with the committee to make this bill consistent with other wild and scenic river designation bills that have been enacted by Congress.

S. 868 would designate the entire 40-mile main stem of the Taunton River as a component of the national wild and scenic rivers system. This corresponds to “Alternative B: Full Designation” as described in the draft report, and is identified in the

draft as the environmentally preferred alternative because it is the alternative that, by virtue of its inclusion of the entire main stem in the designation, provides the highest degree of protection. The draft study does not include an agency preferred alternative. The environmentally preferred alternative is supported by the town meeting and city council votes of all ten communities abutting the Taunton River, as documented in the draft report and the companion document developed during the study, the *Taunton River Stewardship Plan*, dated July 2005.

The draft report concludes that the Taunton River meets the eligibility requirements of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act by virtue of its free-flowing condition and presence of one or more outstandingly remarkable resource values. The 40-mile Taunton River is the longest undammed coastal river in New England. This unique character, including the lack of a head-of-tide dam, is directly related to outstandingly remarkable values identified during the study, including fish, ecology and biological diversity, and recreation. As such, the Taunton River represents a natural fit with Wild and Scenic River Act purposes of recognizing and protecting special free-flowing rivers and the values they support.

The Taunton River is recognized as the most significant river in Massachusetts for anadromous fish species, including alewife, blueback herring, American shad, hickory shad, gizzard shad and rainbow smelt, a direct result of the free-flowing character of the river which allows these and other species unfettered access to spawning tributaries. Similarly, the broader ecology of the river is unusually diverse and intact, supporting 31

distinct wildlife habitats, globally rare plant species, regionally significant freshwater and brackish tidal marshes, and many rare species of birds and amphibians. A Nature Conservancy study has concluded that the Taunton River represents one of the most unique, diverse, and intact ecosystems in the North Atlantic Ecoregion, from Delaware to Maine. Recreationally, the 40-mile Taunton River offers outstanding flatwater paddling, and, in the lower river, additional opportunities for broader recreational uses including power boating and sailing.

The study authorized by Public Law 106-318 has been conducted in partnership with the local communities of the Taunton River, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and other local river interests based upon the partnership wild and scenic river model. This model recognizes and anticipates a limited federal role stemming from the lack of federal land ownership. Successful planning and management under these circumstances requires the fundamental support and involvement of state and local interests. This common basis of support and involvement for the Taunton River is outlined in the *Taunton River Stewardship Plan* (July, 2005). This plan and the strong support it has received through the extensive public involvement of the study, is the principal basis for the draft report's conclusion that the Taunton River can be effectively managed and protected as a component of the national wild and scenic rivers system, and thereby meets the criteria for wild and scenic river suitability. The management scheme proposed in the stewardship plan is similar to ones that have proven effective on other partnership wild and scenic rivers, including the Sudbury, Concord, and Assabet Rivers also in Massachusetts.

It is important to point out that the draft report is out for public review and comment.

Once the study is complete, the Secretary is required by law to submit to the President a report on the suitability or unsuitability of the river for addition to the national wild and scenic rivers system. The President is then required to report to the Congress his recommendations and proposals with respect to the designation of the studied river. If the President recommends that this river be included in the system, we would like to work with the committee on several amendments to the bill to clarify the management scheme for the river and to conform to established legislative models. It would be particularly important in this regard to consider the *Taunton River Stewardship Plan* as the basis for management of the designated wild and scenic river segment.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks, and I would be happy to answer any questions you or other committee members may have regarding this bill.